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COMMENTARY

Media watchdogs and
Rep. Boland's deception

JOSEPH SOBRAN

Did the Reagan team illegally get hold of Jimmy Carter's briefing book before the 1980 TV debate between the candidates? An interesting question. Will the pack journalists manage to parlay the answer into another Watergate? An even more interesting question.

Already some members of the Washington press pack are licking their chops over "Debategate," as they significantly call it. If Reagan cheated, by all means let us know. But this time around, let us also keep a wary eye on the eagerness with which the media magnify the incident.

Even if the media were always accurate, always reliable, always scrupulous, they still would have to decide which facts to magnify and which to minimize. The pack journalists, who style themselves the watchdogs of democracy, hardly let

out a soft woof over a recent story whose importance, in my judgment, dwarfs anything likely to come out of "Debategate."

Last Dec. 9, Rep. Edward Boland, a Massachusetts Democrat, announced the findings of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence concerning Soviet involvement in the nuclear-freeze movement. As testimony the committee had taken from the FBI and CIA was released, Boland reported: "The bottom line is that the hearings provide no evidence that the Soviets direct, manage, or manipulate the nuclear-freeze movement."

Boland was distorting the truth. Surveying the same evidence his committee released, *The Wall Street Journal* concluded in an editorial that "Communist efforts within the freeze movement have been successful in shifting atten-

tion away from the Soviet Union's massive military buildup and toward the Reagan administration's defense programs. Perhaps this does not meet Rep. Boland's definition of 'manipulating' the freeze movement, but it certainly meets ours."

This is not all. Boland appears to have doctored the evidence his committee did release.

As John Barron reports in "KGB Today: The Hidden Hand," one of the key exhibits the committee released was a 48-page brochure published by the Soviet-controlled World Peace Council. But the committee did not release the entire brochure: it omitted 14 pages of the original.

At least three things about these omissions are highly suspicious:

1. The pages omitted included names and photographs of prominent Americans the WPC happily numbered among its allies.

2. Several of these Americans are members of Congress — and more to the point, members of Boland's party: John Burton, Ron Dellums, and Don Edwards of California; Ted Weiss and Charles Rangel of New York; and John Conyers of Michigan, among others.

3. The committee tried to conceal the fact that it had omitted part of the evidence.

When the omissions were exposed, Boland did not deny his effort. Instead he tried to defend the omissions: "I felt that it was not

appropriate for the committee to document the public activities or associations of any member (of Congress)."

Why not? If these activities and associations were public anyway, why play them down? And why is the press corps — except for columnists Jack Anderson and John Lofton — going along with the attempt to minimize the publicity these facts received? Why is Boland's attempted coverup less than a scandal?

What makes the coverup even more sinister is that although Boland professes to be protecting some members of Congress, he is actually deceiving others. The purpose of committee hearings like those his committee held is to gather and report information to the whole Congress, not all of whose members have the time and

means to conduct their own research.

Deceiving the public is one thing. Deceiving one's peers in Congress is another matter. It goes beyond the normal aversion to bad publicity and constitutes a serious breach of faith. In order to be properly informed, Congress depends on its committees and their chairmen not to tamper with the data by deleting evidence without even indicating that deletions were made. This is especially true of the Intelligence Committee.

If Boland wanted to withhold information, the least he could do is say he was withholding it, instead of trying to get the false impression that he was telling all. And if the press is going to give the Bolands of this world a hand through selective reporting, it ought not to preen itself on keeping the public informed.